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Scottish Bird News

No 75 Mar. 2005

Bird Artists in Scotland – Frederick Watson

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In this edition, our Artist's Profile takes the form of an appreciation of the life and work of the renowned artist, Frederick Watson, who died in 2003. To accompany the paintings shown below, we are fortunate to have Derick's own descriptions and comments. We are also indebted to some of his close friends whose thoughts on Derick and his work form the main part of this article.

Before rushing up to St. Abbs Head to catch the latest migrant or savour the unique cliff scenery there, it is worth pausing at the Kittiwake Gallery (part of the National Trust Centre) to enjoy for a moment or two the work of Derick Watson who owned the Gallery and was often to be seen painting there.

Derick was born and raised on Tyneside and moved up to St. Abbs in 1988. He was always drawing, even from a very early age and this soon found an outlet within a growing interest in birds, inspired at school by an ornithologist headmaster. Much later, from 1960 to 1979, he was to teach at Art Colleges, latterly as Course Director, for what was then the largest Fine Art Degree in Britain.

Since then in his work as a full-time painter, this educative element continued to feature in many workshops and expeditions, often involving universities both in Britain and America. Wherever his art took him, Derek was always ready to share his enthusiasm and the final move to a fisherman's cottage at St. Abbs was to bring him into contact with a whole variety of artistic friends.

One of these was wildlife photographer, Laurie Campbell, who writes here of their times together – "Frederick, or Derick Watson to those who knew him, was one of those people I would have liked to have met long before our paths crossed in his gallery over twelve years ago. It happened at a time when I was becoming more interested in looking at the work of artists for inspiration than that of other nature

St. Abbs harbour (watercolour). Derick at work on the cliffs.

photographers. I was beginning to appreciate that the actual species being recorded was much less important than the way in which was recorded. I'm certain this is second nature to wildlife artists, but to photographers pre-occupied with the problem of just getting close to subjects, it is a point that is all too often overlooked.

An example of a painting that epitomises Derick's ability to portray everyday subjects to stunning effect is simply entitled 'The Wave' (below). Had I been there with my camera, I'd probably not have bothered to photograph it. I now know differently and I have Derick to thank for that. We talked about photography and painting extensively on our outings and there never seemed to be enough time to have as many of these as we would both have liked. We visited places I knew well enough to the point where I'd admit to almost becoming complacent about them. Yet somehow, after visiting them with Derick, they took on a whole new meaning and I began to appreciate them afresh due to his enthusiasm. Despite the bouts of poor health he suffered in recent years, his enthusiasm never wavered and I'll always admire his strength of character and sense of humour that was never far away"

The Wave – a Glaucous Gull: 1993
(Derick)" One stormy afternoon as I walked around the harbour, a wave crashed over the breakwater. In the nick of time, a couple of Black-backed Gulls scrambled clear of the crashing sea. I didn't have my sketchbook with me but recognized the humour of the incident would make a fine picture. When I got home, I began a series of working drawings. Movement is important in this painting and in the first drawings, the dark wings of the Black-backed Gulls cut across the direction of this. So, I amended the subject to depict a Glaucous Gull, whose white wings blended into the surf. The early composition studies had the gull "tied" too closely to the bollard, so I changed the bird so that it was flying out of the picture."

Fascinated by the ever-changing kaleidoscope of coastal life on his doorstep at St. Abbs and eager to reflect this in his painting, Derick Watson introduced these images to a world audience, being selected in 1994 and 1997 to take part in both the main touring exhibitions of the Leigh Yawkey Woodson "Birds in Art "Show. After the very prestigious Art Exhibition in Wisconsin, his artwork was further selected to be shown in art museums in the USA and later in Sweden. The Mall Galleries in London have also displayed his work in the annual SWLA exhibition and his paintings have appeared in collections in more than twenty countries.

Offshore Reef: 1994
"This was the first of my paintings exhibited at the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in 1994. It is based on studies of wintering shorebirds, waiting for the tide to drop, so they can resume feeding on small organisms deposited by the receding waters. The rocks are modelled on those I can see from my study window."

Among many visitors to his St. Abbs studio was Ray Murray who remembers it with affection - "Derick always took an interest in his local birds and spent hours looking out to sea from his upstairs studio window which was ideally placed, overlooking St Abb's harbour and the Head beyond. Many birders dream of a house in such a situation and indeed the view was one of the major considerations for moving to St. Abbs. The harbour, and the rocks offshore, were clearly visible in much of his work but this viewpoint was not only a definite source of inspiration but also an excellent vantage point for observing the passage of shearwaters, skuas and gulls. His telescope is lined up there still, looking out to sea. He also saw lots of interesting birds in his postage-stamp sized back garden although his spring Radde's Warbler that was rejected by BBRC on the basis that you don't get Radde's in springtime, still rankled many years after the event.

As local recorder, I always enjoyed Derick's descriptions as they were inevitably accompanied by wonderful sketches that I could never ever hope to emulate. I particularly liked his quick-fire sketches that captured the essence of a passing Balearic Shearwater or Long-tailed Skua. Always an enthusiast for new technologies, he and I would have periodic chats about the latest

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Scottish Bird News
No 75 March 2005

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NEWS & NOTICES

New Members

We welcome the following new members to the Club: **Ayrshire** Mr & Mrs J McCracken, Mr R Wagner, Ms K Waitzmann. **Borders** Mr M Mosley & Ms M Griffiths. **Clyde** Mr J Forbes, Mr D Hunter, Mr L Stewart, Mrs H Sykes. **England, Wales & Northern Ireland** Mr D Strath. **Fife** Mr I MacDonald, Dr I Taylor & Dr J Taylor. **Grampian** Mr D Dunstan, Dr I Patterson. **Highland** Mr K Davis, Dr H Huxley, Mr & Mrs R King, Mr F Stark, Mr T Talbot. **Lothian** Mrs C Bruce, Mr & Mrs A Coulson, Mr S Droop, Mr I Herok, Ms J Lumb, Mr R Millar, Mr B Ordas, Mr S Poole, Miss J Raeburn, Mr & Mrs D Riddell, Dr H Trevelyan, Mrs P Young. **Scotland - No Branch** Mr K Pipes. **Tayside** Mr J Holland, Mr & Mrs B McFarlane.

2005 SOC Annual Conference

This year's Annual Conference will be held on 28–30 October at the Balavil Sport Hotel, Newtonmore and will have an International theme.

200 Club

The latest prizewinners are:

November – 1st - £150 A. Anderson; 2nd - £75 Miss J. Wilcox 3rd - £ 50 Sylvia Laing; 4th - £30 Miss S. Taylor; 5th - £20 Dr. Boddington; 6th - £10 Mrs. D. Melrose

December - 1st - £30 Mrs. D. Melrose; 2nd - £20 Mrs. V. McLellan; 3rd - £10 Dr. MacIntyre

January - 1st - £30 J. M. Wills; 2nd - £20 Dr. Rowling; 3rd - £10 D. S. Omand

New members are always welcome – please contact: Daphne Peirse-Duncombe at Rosebank, Gattonside, Melrose, Roxburghshire TD6 9NH.

Request for information – Tawny Owls on Arran

Writing the Tawny Owl account for the new book on the *Birds of Scotland* has highlighted some apparent inconsistencies over its status on Arran, which readers might be able to resolve. In *The Birds of Scotland* (Baxter & Rintoul, 1953), it was described as 'a common resident'. However, in *Birds in Scotland* (Thom, 1986) a 1982 source describes it 'as spreading with five known territories', and Valerie Thom commented that 'either the original description was generous, or there was a decrease around the middle of the century'. In support of this more cautious assessment, neither of the two breeding bird atlases for Britain and Ireland have confirmed breeding on Arran. Recent *Clyde Island Bird Reports* list at least one record for each of the last ten years (Bernie Zonfrillo *pers. comm.*), but these are all of calling birds and not confirmed breeding records, and could be from occasional birds that reach Arran from the mainland or Isle of Bute (where they do breed). So far, I have been unable to trace any confirmed breeding record for Arran. Interestingly, the Bank Vole is absent from Arran, and this is one of the most important woodland prey species for Tawny Owls on the mainland.

So, I would be interested to hear from anyone who has a confirmed breeding record for Arran; either a nest with eggs/nestlings or recently fledged chicks, with the date and location. Also, does anyone have information to support the statement in Baxter & Rintoul that Tawny Owls were common residents on Arran in the mid 20th Century?

Steve Petty, Craigielea, Kames, Tighnabruaich, Argyll PA21 2AE (e-mail: stevepetty@compuserve.com

Scottish Birds Records Committee (SBRC)

New Secretary: After seventeen years as Secretary, Ron Forrester is to stand down and Angus Hogg has agreed to take over, with effect from 1st April 2005. From that date, correspondence for SBRC should be sent to Angus Hogg, Kirklea, Crosshill, Maybole, Ayrshire KA19 7RJ.

Election of New Member: One member of SBRC retires annually by rotation and Martin Gray is due to retire this year. Nominations to fill the vacancy are invited and should be submitted to Angus Hogg (at the above address) by 30th June, signed by a proposer and a seconder, who must both be SOC members. If there is more than one nomination, a postal ballot shall take place in which all SOC Local Recorders will have one vote.

In order to ensure that there is a replacement, SBRC always put forward a nomination and on this occasion Dr Tristan ap Rheinallt is our candidate. Tristan, who recently moved to Lewis, lived for the previous twelve years on Islay. Formerly Local Recorder for Argyll, he is a very experienced observer and has seen all of the species on the SBRC List. As is always the case we encourage additional nominations.

Ron Forrester, Secretary, SBRC, The Gables, Eastlands Road, Rothesay, Isle of Bute PA20 9JZ

Ringers relaxing *(Iain Livingstone)*

2004 Scottish Ringers' Conference

The 30th annual Scottish Ringers' Conference was held in Kingussie from 19th–21st November and was hosted by the Tay ringing Group.

Once again this Conference was a feast of talks with extra helpings of chat all washed down with plenty of drink! Things got off to a flying start on Friday night when Brian Little took us on a tour of Australia. He had spent three months ringing the vast numbers of waders and terns, which both breed and winter there. In his ground-breaking project, a wintering population of Japanese Arctic Terns was discovered and a single flock of Oriental Pratincoles numbering 3 million birds recorded (previous known world population - 70,000).

The regular talks covered a wide variety of species from finches to seabirds, waders, geese and raptors. Studies into the breeding success of Blue Tits in different woodlands in Perthshire, Twite on different nesting habitats in the Hebrides and the breeding and wintering sites of Icelandic Black-tailed Godwits showed how some birds have the pick of the best sites while the rest have to make do. This results in some birds producing the bulk of the next generation while those on poorer sites contribute little to the population. Ringing seabirds is often difficult and potentially dangerous as shown by the long-term study on Sule Skerry, but it is enjoyable. More importantly though, the results from the summer's expeditions are put to good use as the ringing recoveries come in. The B.T.O. have analysed the recoveries of auks from the four recent serious oil spills in the Channel and Biscay. They can now predict which populations and age classes of birds will be at risk in future spills in these areas at different times of year.

Five talks included results from radio-tracking, an increasingly useful tool in bird research. Tracking winter finches and buntings helps to identify their winter ranges so that plans can be put in place to boost over-winter survival rates nationally. Similarly the daily usage of crop fields by Geese is used to calculate how much herbicide can be safely applied to these crops, previously this figure was guessed at!

This year's surprise package came from Garry Mortimer with an excellent talk on the bats of Tentsmuir forest. His radio-tracking project had shown how individual bats are site-faithful, holding separate feeding sites, thus minimising competition and using more of the available habitat The conference closed with two raptor talks; the much persecuted Peregrine had few ringing recoveries of adult birds but a detailed project by Mike McGrady had targeted breeding adults and has doubled this number. He has also fitted adapted rings holding electronic tags (as in pet implants) so that in future a scanner can be hidden near a nest site to read the number, removing the need to recatch breeding adults. Roy Dennis finished with some life histories of Honey Buzzards bred in the Highlands. He tracked them as they migrated south-west, often out into the Atlantic and to their deaths. The adult birds however have learned to travel in a more southerly direction avoiding the ocean and returning to breed again. He suggests that our birds are of Scandinavian origin, the young birds instinctively migrating in this direction and thus limiting the chances of the population ever increasing in this country.

This was a particularly well organised and enjoyable Conference and I am looking forward to November already.

Iain Livingstone

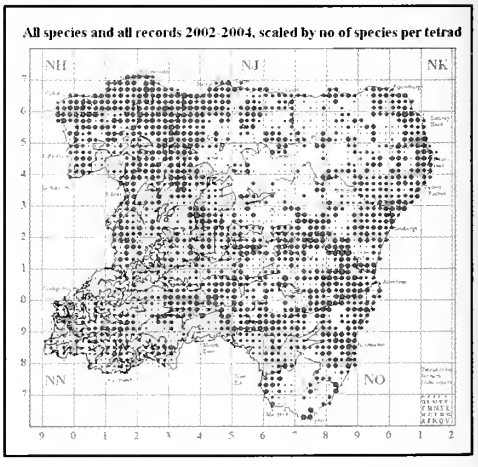
Note from Arizona

Josh Burns, an SOC member from Phoenix, Arizona who monitors birds in that area extends this invitation to members – "any time Scots birders want to visit Arizona, I will be more than glad to act as a guide (I am free but there are better paid guides). Contact at josh_a_burns@yahoo.com

North-East Scotland Breeding Bird Atlas – three years down, two to go

Fieldwork continued well in 2004, the third year of our five-year Breeding Bird Atlas in Aberdeenshire and Moray. Although it is a challenge meeting our annual coverage targets, there is still tremendous enthusiasm for the project. Almost 280 people have contributed so far, producing some 60,000 records. The map shows the general level of coverage, with land over 300m shaded. We now have records from 1,937 of the 2,340 tetrads, though intensity of coverage still varies greatly. The gaps are obvious, and clearly western Buchan is a high priority for targeted visits! The Mearns in the south is also poorly covered – are there any Angus birders out there who wish to help?

One of the aims of the atlas is to allow comparison with the previous Aberdeenshire breeding atlas carried out in 1981–1984. The tetrad data have to be converted into the recording units used in that project, but some fascinating maps can be produced. Is it true that Tree Sparrow (see maps) has increased in range here over the last 20 years? We can easily make such comparisons, but we will also have to interpret them, including questions about coverage levels in the two atlases, and while some species clearly have changed in status, interpretation may be more complex for others. These issues will be considered carefully as the project draws to a close.



We are still in need of help from birdwatchers from out of the area. If any SOC member wishes to spend a weekend helping, we would be delighted to hear from them. Any birders living close to the borders of the area might also consider participating – if so, please contact me at ifnp@clara.co.uk (019755 62457) or Martin Cook for Moray on martin.cook9@virgin.net.

Ian Francis

(continued from page 2)
developments in digital photography, video and computers and how they could be applied to birding and art - he always loved to demonstrate his latest piece of kit, like all 'boys with toys'.

Derick had always expressed interest in the local bird report, and eventually became the main contributor of much-needed artwork to the Borders Bird Report. He was always delighted to take on the task of doing the cover artwork and eventually took over the task of redesigning the surrounding graphics and layout as well, producing a smarter and more attractive design than I ever managed. Genial, always smiling through his discomfort latterly, I do miss my visits after a trek round the Head"

often portray elements of weather, light and atmosphere – the watercolour medium can achieve this remarkable transparency of texture, e.g. our cover picture, or can generate a real depth of colour tones as in the painting of Brent Geese below.

Another SOC member, Ann Gardner, remembers how willing Derick was to share his painting talent - "Derick Watson and his wife Barbara always made us welcome when Bill and I visited the Kittiwake Gallery at St.Abbs. On our first visit I had just started painting Puffins and Derick quickly produced his sketch book and showed me how he handled the detail of the colourful beak and eye. We had only just met him, an obviously accomplished wildlife artist, but he was immediately generous with his help to a novice wildlife artist. That was characteristic of Derick, always kind and considerate. We often visited the Gallery and admired his range of work from very large exciting prints to small intimate paintings of birds and the local landscape

We also saw him start to experiment with video and computers to develop his art. Both of us were so sad when his illness caused his fatal heart attack, just as he was getting well into his stride using new technology.. These new methods were helping him to reach a wider audience, which he thoroughly deserved. He will be sorely missed."

Siberian Brents: 2002 (below)
"Every year I travel 500k to Norfolk, to study the Dark-bellied Brent Geese that visit the coastal marshes in winter. Unlike my wintering Brents which represent the whole of the Spitzbergen population, these birds come from Siberia - accompanying them is an occasional Pacific Black Brant from Alaska"

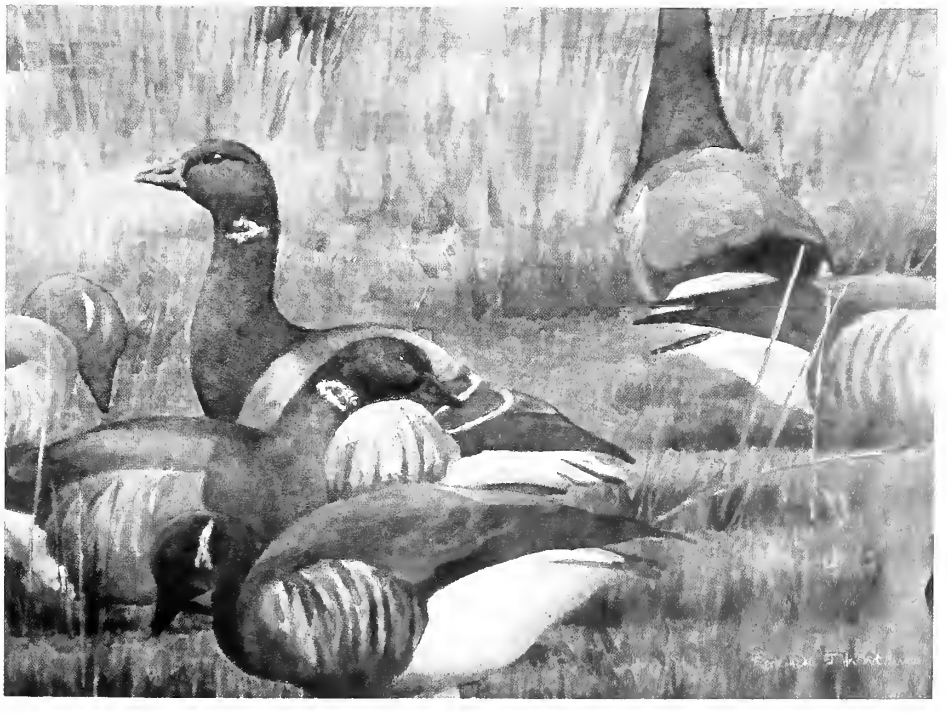
Derick Watson had a simple way of explaining successful artwork – "You have got to know and love your subject, capture the essence, the rhythm, the movement..." In his lifetime, he managed to transmit this love of the natural world to countless people and will surely be remembered as one of Scotland's great wildlife artists.

Jimmy Maxwell

We are indebted to Barbara Watson for making available so much information and visual material for this article to celebrate, in a small way, the life's work of her husband.

Summer Squall – Puffins: 1992
"This has been my most popular print, based on a watercolour. The picture depicts the atmosphere of the surf, crashing on the rocks and being whipped up by the breeze. The Puffins are there merely to provide a focal point. The sitting bird is actually painted from a drawing I made of a Fulmar on its nest, which I sketched as I waited for the Puffins to return after being scared off by my arrival. Of course, although I was able to use the basic pose, I had to modify not only the plumage, but also proportions, in order to transform it into a Puffin"

Derick revelled in the supreme challenge of watercolour and after twenty years using this medium, he maintained that he was then learning more than at the very beginning! His Kittiwake Award reflects this in that it is bestowed on preferably an unknown artist whose work shows evidence of study in the field. His works



Scavenging seabirds short of food

Bonxie patrolling *(Bob Furness)*

Following an exceptionally poor breeding season in 2003, seabirds in the northern isles suffered the worst breeding failure in recorded history in 2004. The breeding failure affected those seabirds that are most dependent on sandeels, such as terns, Kittiwakes, Arctic Skuas, Puffins. These species were also badly affected during the late 1980s when sandeel abundance fell to low levels at Shetland. In addition, some seabird species that appear to be less sensitive to sandeel abundance were badly affected. In 2004, a huge proportion of the common guillemots in Shetland simply failed to lay eggs, and deserted their colonies. This may possibly be a consequence of the fact that common guillemots normally feed on sandeels to quite an extent even during the winter, as they can dive down to the seabed and disturb sandeels from the sediment, whereas most of the surface-feeding seabirds leave the area or switch to other foods for the winter. The failure of guillemots points to the sandeel stock being in even worse shape in 2004 than it was at the end of the 1980s, and research surveys fishing for sandeels around Shetland also support this conclusion. Quite rightly, a lot of effort is being put into trying to understand why the sandeel stocks in the northern North Sea have collapsed so dramatically.

But in 2004 we also saw almost complete breeding failure of Great Skuas (bonxies) and Great Black-backed Gulls, and this failure was evident throughout Orkney and Shetland despite the fact that in Orkney, some of the seabirds feeding on sandeels managed to find enough to produce a slightly better breeding output than in Shetland. The failure of these scavenging seabirds however was predictable, and only in part due to the sandeel collapse.

Until relatively recently, Great Skuas and Great Black-backed Gulls in the northern isles fed on three main kinds of food. They took some sandeels, which they mostly caught at the sea surface from large shoals exploited by Gannets, Fulmars, skuas, gulls and diving seabirds such as auks and Shags. The lack of sandeels may be mitigated to a small extent by a recent increase in herring abundance, but for bonxies and black-backs this seems to be only minor compensation for the loss of sandeels. They fed extensively on undersized haddock and whiting, bottom-dwelling fish that are only available to them as fishery 'discards' thrown away by fishermen trawling inshore waters for these target species. They also fed to a small extent by killing other seabirds such as Kittiwakes and Puffins and so in places like Foula, breeding territories of bonxies and black-backs were always littered with the carcasses of particular prey. Some black-backs actually nested on Puffin slopes and fed almost exclusively on that species.

Greater black-backed Gulls *(David Palmar)*

But at the population level, discarded fish from fisheries represented the bulk of the diet of these species in Orkney and Shetland over recent decades. With the decline in stocks of whitefish (especially cod), restrictions on fishing have been introduced in the northwest North Sea that have greatly reduced the amounts of fish being discarded. There had been a progressive reduction in discard amounts; in the late 1960s, up to 300,000 tonnes of haddock and whiting was discarded per year, but by 2000, this had fallen to about 60,000 t. In the last three years, the level of fishing effort has been cut drastically in an attempt to save the North Sea cod stock from complete extinction. With technical measures to reduce the catch of undersized fish, less boats in the fishery and less fish being caught, there is no longer an incentive for fishermen to discard any haddock or whiting that could be sold (because they are unlikely to exceed the quota for haddock or whiting and so will not wish to 'high-grade'), so that discarding rates as well as catches have reduced very quickly since 2000. With this main food supply having suddenly disappeared and sandeel stocks also at an all time low, bonxies and black-backs have been turning increasingly to killing other seabirds (including each other!). Recently we showed that the decline in discarding from 1970 to 2000 had resulted in a big increase in the killing of seabirds by bonxies in Shetland (Votier *et al.* 2004, Nature 427, 727–730). Given the drastic cuts in fishing in 2003 and 2004 we decided to tour bonxie and black-back colonies in Orkney and Shetland in summer 2004 to see how the birds were affected by these latest changes.

Storm Petrel remains *(Bob Furness)*

Bonxie on Foula *(Bob Furness)*

We were not surprised to find that almost all bonxies and black-backs in Orkney and Shetland suffered complete breeding failure. The failures were most rapid and obvious at the largest colonies, where many birds did not even lay eggs and progressively abandoned the breeding grounds from May onwards. As a result, lots of hungry bonxies moved south in early summer, which led for example to abnormal numbers seen killing guillemot chicks off the Isle of May and in the Clyde. In 2004, black-backed gulls fed predominantly on small crabs, rabbits and mountain hares. We think they got the crabs from inshore pot fishery waste. In Orkney many of the rabbits were hunted in sand dunes, but in Shetland quite a number were scavenged as road kills. This resulted in many black-backs also being hit by vehicles, a somewhat unexpected consequence of EU fisheries management! Bonxies fed extensively on rabbits and mountain hares in Hoy, but also on seabirds, which were less frequent in black-back diets. Curiously, bonxies did not feed on crabs at all. In Orkney, a few black-back and bonxie chicks ate regurgitated sandeels, herring or meat, but most were severely starved. We found a lot of dead chicks, and suspect that very few of those we saw alive actually survived to fledge. In Shetland hardly any pairs managed to raise chicks beyond hatching.

The only colony where we found both bonxie and black-back chicks of normal weight was Mousa, in Shetland. Here, the numbers with chicks were very small, but a few pairs of bonxies and a couple of pairs of black-backs were feeding almost entirely on Storm-Petrels and had well-developed chicks. Storm-Petrels were also prominent in the diet of a few pairs of black-backs in Orkney, particularly on Switha. Both at Switha and Mousa we found pellets containing Storm-Petrel legs with BTO rings. On Mousa, Storm-Petrels were found in 74% of the bonxie pellets we examined. This is a worrying statistic, as Mousa is the only large colony of Storm-Petrels in Shetland, and the impact of bonxies may well be unsustainable. It seems unlikely that food supply for bonxies and black-backs will be any better in 2005, but both species show strong nest site fidelity so birds may continue to have severe impacts on other seabirds over the next few years. Probably in the longer term, bonxie and black-back numbers will fall, but the adult survival rate of these birds is high, so that is likely to be a slow process; the impact of these birds on other species may be much more rapid.

Bob Furness

(Ian Francis)

Windfarms and Eagles – a case study of Edinbane, Skye

In SBN *72, Richard Evans of the RSPB suggested that competition amongst developers for sites had resulted in some hasty planning applications, supported by incomplete or inaccurate Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs). The Edinbane Windfarm on Skye exemplifies these concerns, especially in relation to Golden Eagles.*

In February 2002, AMEC Wind applied to Highland Council to erect a 28-turbine windfarm in uplands south of Edinbane, Isle of Skye. They submitted an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) based on data collected by the Lawrence Environmental Consultancy. Although the development posed risks to several raptor species, this analysis will concentrate on Golden Eagles.

A pair of Golden Eagles had formerly bred in the area but for some years the home range had been vacant and was now used extensively by sub-adult birds. The EIA included the available historical data as well as 70 hours of field data collected by the Lawrence Consultancy in 2001. Local Golden Eagle experts K.Crane and K.Nellist were employed to carry out 12 hours of Vantage Point Watches (VPW) in the area in January 2002. The EIA submitted in February 2002 thus included this information. It is significant that in 11 watches conducted in 2001, no activity of Golden Eagles had been recorded, whereas four watches by Crane & Nellist in January 2002 produced seven separate observations of immature Golden Eagles within the development site and seven others nearby, together totalling over 54 minutes of flight duration.

Following submission of the Planning Application and the EIA, objections were made by RSPB and SNH (the latter mainly on landscape grounds). As a result, an amended report was submitted in June 2002 with results of additional VPW undertaken by Crane & Nellist for the Lawrence Consultancy. Ten 'dual' watches of three hours duration were conducted between 27th January and 9th May 2002. Fifty-five Golden Eagle flights were recorded, with a total flight duration of 301 minutes and 30% of the observed flight activity within 300 metres of the proposed wind turbines.

SNH guidance on collision risk factors was available at the time, but neither the February or June AMEC document contained anything other than subjective judgements regarding 'collision risk'. Following the amended EIA of June 2002, RSPB re-emphasised its concerns to the Planning Authority, particularly for Golden Eagles. Although SNH's updated guidance on wind farms had been published by June 2002, it appears that only lip service was paid to this guidance. In a letter to the Planning Authority on 6 September, 2002, SNH acknowledged that the raw VPW data previously requested from AMEC had not been supplied, but rather than insist that the information was made available, the letter concluded:

"...the site is utilised by four species of birds of prey which are listed on Annex 1 of the EC Birds Directive. Levels of use by these species indicate that the wind farm as proposed, is unlikely to cause a significant risk of mortality due to collisions."

Despite the inadequacies of the EIA, it should have been evident to SNH from the summary data included that Edinbane was important for sub-adult Golden Eagles. RSPB maintained its objection to the development, and also made representations at a Special Meeting of Highland Council in November 2002. Despite AMEC being repeatedly asked, the raw VPW data were not produced and RSPB therefore argued that the EIA was not of a sufficient quality for Highland Council to reach a decision, and also raised the question of a judicial review. SNH did not contribute to the Special Meeting, suggesting its previous concerns had been removed, and the application, amended to 27 turbines, was approved by Highland Council.

In the meantime, a planning application had also been submitted for the neighbouring area of Ben Aketil. The proposal was by Renewable Development Company (RDC) Scotland Ltd for 14 turbines approximately two km west of the Edinbane site, raising concerns about the cumulative impacts on birds of the two wind-farms. SNH subsequently requested that Golden Eagle collision risk and changes to behaviour, particularly avoidance, should be assessed for the combined proposals.

Using VPW data collected independently for Aketil, and the original data for Edinbane, collision risk modelling was undertaken by Mike Madders for Natural Research (Projects) Ltd to help establish the likely impacts on Golden Eagles at both wind-farms separately, and also cumulatively. The results, contained in the RDC Environmental Impact Statement of March 2004, are shown opposite:

Edinbane village *(Bob McMillan)*

Predicted Collision Rate

	Total Collisions	Collisions per turbine per year
Ben Aketil	1 bird every 8.5 years	0.008
Edinbane	1 bird every 1.8 years	0.021
Combined	1 bird every 1.5 years	0.016

Juv. Golden Eagle *(K. Crane)*

These findings for cumulative impact led RSPB to write to Highland Council objecting to the proposals for Ben Aketil, and highlighting the unsatisfactory position with regard to the earlier analysis for Edinbane.

After the publication of the Cumulative Risk Assessment for the Ben Aketil proposal SNH then obtained all the raw data and conducted its own modelling. Though the analysis had generally followed SNH's guidance, a collision 'avoidance rate' (effectively the chance of a bird avoiding a turbine) of 99.5% had been used; SNH recommends 95%. The results for Edinbane were serious enough at a bird killed every 1.8 years using 99.5% avoidance, but changed dramatically at 95% to a prediction of 5.5 Golden Eagles killed per annum. SNH therefore wrote to Highland Council on 24th May 2004, concluding:-

"The implication for issuing consent for this development to proceed is potentially serious and may lead to adverse effects on the golden eagle population, possibly including a decline in the breeding population.... The risk posed in relation to collision mortality is uncertain but potentially severe (the collapse of the Skye eagle population is arguably catastrophic)."

This emotive language could be interpreted to suggest that SNH had changed its position on Edinbane, recognising the importance of the Edinbane area for the sub-adult population of Golden Eagles on Skye. Given SNH's statutory responsibilities, any decline in this population could impact upon the Cuillins Special Protection Area for Golden Eagles classified under the EU Wild Birds Directive. As well as the protection of sites themselves, this legislation places statutory obligations on Governments to protect habitats outwith SPA boundaries.

Although the Edinbane wind-farm has received planning approval, this remains subject to final legal agreements. In a letter to Highland Council in August 2004, SNH suggested it was a priority for AMEC to re-analyse the existing data to re-assess collision risks both overall and at the individual turbine level, using a 95% avoidance rate. This was subsequently carried out and submitted by Lawrence for AMEC on 3rd October 2004. It was implied that there were limitations with the previous modelling and an alternative analysis was applied, using a 'more realistic' avoidance rate of 99.62%. Lawrence predicted 0.07 Golden Eagle strikes a year for Edinbane, the equivalent of a strike every 14.6 years. With the 95% precautionary rate suggested by SNH, a prediction of 0.9 Golden Eagle strikes per year was achieved.

RSPB responded to the Lawrence submission on 18th November, 2004, suggesting it did not constitute an objective re-evaluation of the Golden Eagle collision risk, and recommended to Highland Council that the re-assessment should not be used as a basis for decision making. RSPB suggested there was no substantial evidence that the 99.62% avoidance rate was any more realistic than the 99.5% used by Madders.

SNH responded on 19th November 2004, and confirmed there would be no objection to the development subject to conditions regarding the re-location/removal of a small number of turbines and over monitoring. SNH accepted that:

"the revised analysis provides sufficient comfort that the risks to the Skye and to the Cuillin SPA eagle populations can be managed."

Although SNH recommended further VPW in August-December, 2005, they did not advise that final planning be delayed until these data were analysed.

A further detailed technical response was submitted by SNH (Whitfield and Band) on 26th November 2004. Despite outlining several concerns and criticisms of the Lawrence report, and a rejection of the 99.62% avoidance rate suggested, a 98% avoidance rate appeared to be acceptable and this provided a range from 0.27 to 0.6 Eagle deaths per annum. According to Whitfield and Band these predicted deaths are not without concern. They also suggested that there are major implications for cumulative effects of wind farm proposals in other areas used by sub-adults. On this basis it must be questioned why they did not also include the Aketil data in their analysis. It is also difficult to reconcile the precautionary approach in the technical response with the SNH response to the Planning Authority only a few days earlier.

The Edinbane Case Study raises concerns about the professionalism and independence of consultants, and the quality and parameters of fieldwork. It raises serious questions about a collision risk modelling technique which has produced four widely differing results from the same data. It appears that SNH has rejected its 95% 'precautionary' approach to the analysis. To a layman, the model appears to have been manipulated to present a 'best fit' solution. It raises questions as to why SNH made no objections at the original planning meeting in 2002 and retained this position throughout. There appears to be a political dimension as to whether SNH will take a robust stance on any developments other than those in designated areas.

Eagles soaring *(Charles Palmar)*

The focus at Edinbane on Golden Eagles has overshadowed the importance of the area for White-tailed Sea Eagle, Hen Harrier and Merlin, all of which are potentially at risk of turbine collision or disturbance. Unfortunately an inadequate EIA process failed to identify these risks. With the related development at Ben Aketil, there are potential cumulative impacts on these species too which, regrettably, SNH has completely ignored.

Bob McMillan
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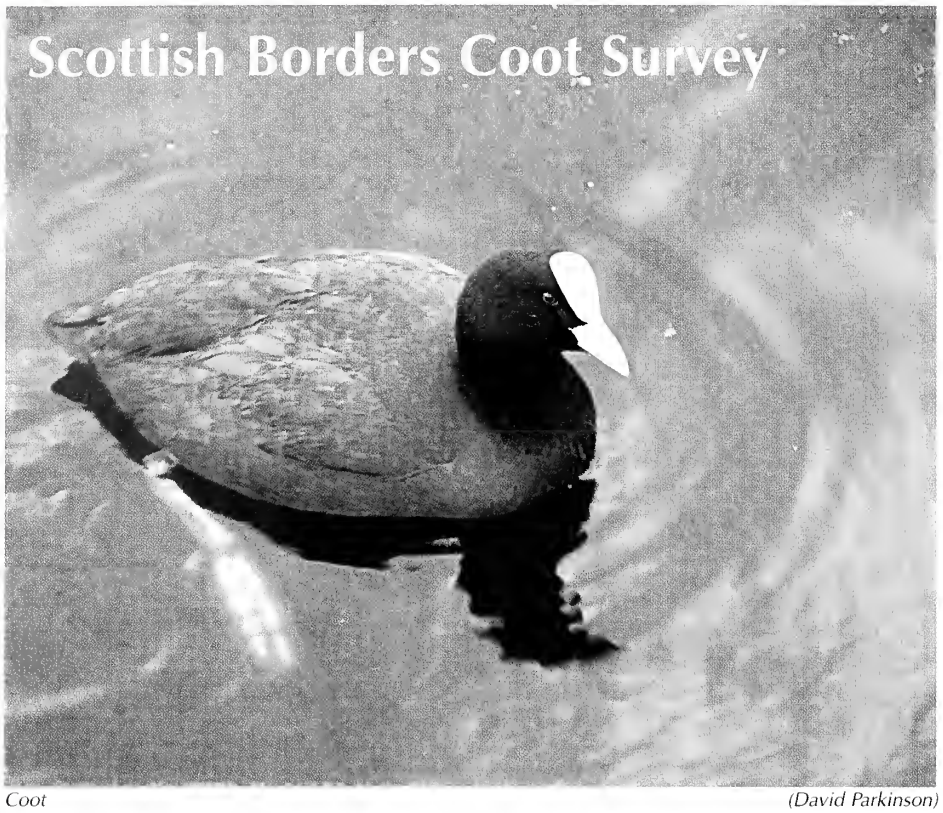
The opinions expressed in this article are Bob McMillan's own views and do not necessarily reflect those of SOC – eds.

Scottish Borders Coot Survey



Coot *(David Parkinson)*

As a reaction to comments made in the Borders Bird Report *about the fairly disastrous breeding seasons for Coots in the Borders during 2001 and 2002, I raised the issue during a meeting of the Borders SOC Discussion Group, the local forum that meets monthly at the RSPB Office near Selkirk.*

After a more thorough examination of all breeding records in recent years it was apparent that a dramatic decline had taken place in the local Coot breeding population. In 2002 there was only evidence of just 16 successful broods with 31 young, whereas between 1992 and 1999 the number of broods casually reported had varied between 52 and 158 with as many as 440 young being found in the best year. The dataset on breeding success, although mostly of casual records, indicated that the problem started to manifest itself after 1999.

It was agreed that the Discussion Group should organise a survey of breeding Coots during 2004 in order to establish the scale of the problem and also the possible causes.

Approximately 80 sites throughout the Borders were selected from the Bird Database where Coots were known to have bred in recent years. Volunteers were asked to visit these sites twice during the breeding season, in May and again in July/August. The first visit was to establish how many birds were at the site, how many had territories and also clutch sizes if possible. The second was to ascertain breeding success by counting brood sizes and noting the size of the young.

Results

49 sites, more than half of the 78 identified waters, were surveyed during 2004. The counts from these 49 sites were then compared with counts made during the period when the breeding Coot population appeared healthy, before 2000. This comparison showed that there had been no change in 11 (22%) of the sites surveyed but that there had been a decline in 32 (65%) of the sites selected. No sites showed an increase in the breeding population and it was not possible to carry out a comparison for 6 of the sites. Indeed 12 sites had no reports of Coot at all.

Only 126 birds were actually counted, including young, and this compared to a total of 376 birds at these waters in previous years during the late 1990s.

Not only were the number of birds surveyed down on previous years, but breeding success was also poor. The number of young counted in July/August at the 49 sites totalled only 45 with an average brood size of 2.8.

Summary of Coot Breeding Success 1992–2003

	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03
Sites	61	45	49	39	92	63	62	70	30	26	27	26
Pairs	244	218	234	215	389	281	226	257	100	119	70	86
Broods	94	52	90	58	158	103	68	84	41	18	16	16
Young	296	141	281	180	440	286	191	215	95	44	31	29
MBS	3.15	2.71	3.12	3.10	2.78	2.78	2.81	2.56	2.32	2.44	1.94	1.81

Coot with young *(Lang Stewart)*

Coot fight *(Lang Stewart)*

Discussion

The survey proved that there has indeed been a dramatic decline in the breeding Coot population in the Borders. Those taking part in the survey could identify no specific reason for the decline although it seems likely that part of the problem is recruitment as the table of breeding success suggests. In the late 1980s to the late 1990s, the mean brood size reported annually averaged around 3.00. The drop away from this to a value of 2.50 or lower suggests that breeding is being impaired. However birds are now missing from over half of the sites reported annually and that suggests, as the survey indicated, that adults are also in short supply. The time scale involved, less than 5 years, makes it clear that while recruitment is being impaired that there has been no time for that effect to be translated onto the population and that it is the loss of adult birds that is the underlying cause of the population collapse.

The usual reasons for a decline in a breeding population are loss of habitat, food availability, disturbance or disease but none of these seem to apply to a bird that is widely dispersed across a large number of water bodies in the area. While one site might suffer from one or more of these difficulties, it is unlikely that many sites would simultaneously suffer a loss of food, a sudden increase in disturbance or indeed disease.

In looking for other possible causes it was noted that the Otter has shown a fairly dramatic local increase in recent years.

Reports of Otter to the Scottish Borders Biological Records Centre

Of the 279 constant sites surveyed throughout the Borders for Otter signs in 77–79, 84–85 and 91–94, the percentage of positive sites increased from 31% to 39% to 63% respectively. There is every indication that there have been further large increases in the proportion of sites with evidence of Otter activity since 1994.

Although it has been suspected that the increase in the Otter population may be a contributory factor there is absolutely no evidence to support this. However such proof would be difficult to obtain even when Otter is suspected. This extends to the massive 14,000 pair Black-headed Gull colony at Bemersyde Moss in the Borders that has suffered total failure of breeding with eggs and young being abandoned en masse in mid-June during each summer since 2000. The number attempting to breed is now declining with less than 8,000 pairs present in 2004. Despite observers looking from the hide no actual predation has been noted, although Otters are now seen there quite regularly and seem to cause great disturbance. While Otters do eat birds from time to time, it is usually when their preferred prey – fish and amphibians – are scarce or unavailable.

The New Atlas of Breeding Birds 1988–1991 noted that Coot had stopped breeding on Shetland and had declined on Orkney and that "the Scottish range reduction has continued in the last 20 years, most noticeably in the coastal areas along the southern fringe of the Moray Firth and in NE Scotland". The reduction we are now seeing in the Borders could therefore be a result of the southerly contraction of the Coot's range.

Otter *(Lang Stewart)*

What Next

A further survey is planned for 2005 using the same methodology as in 2004 but with an increased coverage of water bodies. A greater emphasis will also be placed on trying to discover the cause of the problem and also whether species with similar breeding habits to Coots have been affected.

We are unsure as to whether this phenomenon is limited to Borders or not and would appreciate any observations from elsewhere in Scotland.

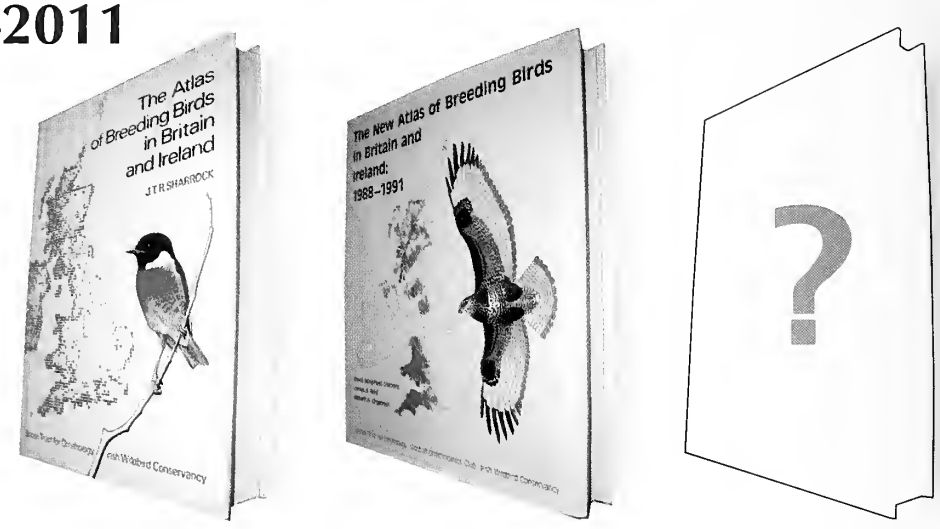
David Parkinson

The next Distribution Atlas of birds in Britain and Ireland: 2007–2011

The last time the distribution of breeding birds in Britain and Ireland was mapped was in the early 1990s. The resulting book was the New Atlas of Breeding Birds of Britain and Ireland, *published in 1993. That project was the result of a partnership between the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), the SOC and BirdWatch Ireland. A new atlas is now planned, and again the SOC has agreed to be the Scottish partner. This time the plan is to undertake a ground-breaking combined winter and breeding atlas and fieldwork will begin in two and a half years time (winter 2007/2008). SOC President Mark Holling and Moray & Nairn Bird Recorder Martin Cook have agreed to represent the SOC and Scottish interests on a working group chaired by the BTO: the first meeting was held in November 2004. Martin is one of the organisers of the current Northeast Scotland Atlas and, as well as his SOC connections, Mark was co-organiser and co-author of the Southeast Scotland Atlas. Both have a wealth of other atlas and fieldwork experience to offer.*

This article gives some background and outlines current thinking about the next national atlas. It is based on an article which appeared in *BTO News* 254 (September–October 2004). This will be the first of a number of features about this project to keep SOC members up to date. It is hoped that many of you will be interested in taking part in this major SOC survey in the years to come.

Having published three major bird atlases, the BTO has a long history of pioneering new approaches to distributional studies. The 1968–72 breeding bird atlas was one of the first to be completed anywhere in the world. The BTO and the Irish Wildbird Conservancy followed this up with an atlas of wintering birds over three winters in the early 1980s. This atlas was innovative in that it estimated abundance of birds as well as their distribution. The most recent atlas for Britain and Ireland was a breeding atlas that ran from 1988 to 1991; this pioneered new ways of assessing regional patterns in breeding abundance. The cover, reproduced here, depicts the regional abundance of the Buzzard. One could not ask for a clearer illustration as to why a new assessment of bird distribution is needed; recently the Buzzard has shown a remarkable eastward expansion of its breeding range and the next atlas will surely produce a very different picture indeed.



A combined breeding and winter atlas

The novel feature of the next atlas will be the combination of breeding and winter into one project. There are several reasons for this. A critical one is that winter distributions are just as important in conservation terms as breeding ones, so it makes sense to give them equal prominence, especially in these islands, with huge wintering populations of birds from across Europe, Scandinavia and the Arctic. Whilst the breeding season is a crucial time of year for all birds, many species are limited by factors affecting overwinter survival. Furthermore, climate change may be having particularly pronounced - but currently unmeasured - effects on the winter distributions of many species.

The atlas will run over four winters and four breeding seasons, which should make for interesting fieldwork, creating an opportunity to compare breeding and winter bird lists in the same areas. Fieldwork will start in the winter of 2007/08, although before then we will need to trial different approaches to the fieldwork, especially in the winter. There will be a break between the summer and winter fieldwork with the latter taking place between November and February. As well as mapping distributions by 10-km squares in the time-honoured fashion, we aim to document broad abundance patterns in both summer and winter. Whilst the methods cannot be finalised until we have completed the pilot work, we can be reasonably sure that the breeding season methods will be very similar to those adopted in the 1988–91 atlas, in order to ensure comparability.

The importance of atlases

Atlases are now established as one of several complementary approaches for assessing the numbers, trends and distributions of birds. They are unique in providing an overview of the entire avifauna – they represent a 20-year opportunity to take stock of the status and distribution of all birds. Although the annual monitoring schemes such as the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey have some capacity to generate information on distribution and large-scale abundance patterns, it is never as comprehensive as that generated by atlases. A review of atlases published in *Bird Study* in 1998 (Vol. 45, pages 129–145) concluded that ".....atlases have become an indispensable tool for assessing large-scale patterns of bird distribution and distributional change and for answering a wide range of questions relating to them. They have many applications in ecology and conservation and should be regarded as an essential complement to annual population monitoring schemes and fine-scale studies of bird-habitat relationships."

At least as important, however, is the fact that for many birdwatchers, atlases have enormous appeal. The fieldwork is fun and immensely rewarding. The atlases themselves are of enduring value and fascination. The past atlases continue to raise so many questions about why birds are found where they are.

It is essential that we do not underestimate the size of the task ahead, either in terms of the amount of fieldwork needed, or the resources required to ensure success. The SOC will provide the lead in co-ordinating fieldwork in Scotland and it is likely that once again there will be a Scottish organiser recruited to ensure maximum coverage in Scotland. We will not only be calling once more on the birdwatchers who took part in previous atlases, but we will also need to enthuse a new generation of atlas workers.

Mark Holling, Rob Fuller & Graham Appleton

Capercaillie in Scotland – halting the decline

(Des Dugan)

During the late 1990s, the Capercaillie was officially deemed the most rapidly declining bird species in Great Britain and was predicted to disappear entirely from Scottish forests within a little over a decade. To monitor this situation, a third national Capercaillie survey was conducted during winter 2003–04. Funded by RSPB and SNH, with support from Forestry Commission Scotland, it involved winter surveys of 643 2-km long transects. The population estimate derived from the survey was 1,980 individuals - an apparent increase of 84% since 1998–99 (Table 1).

Table 1: results of three national Capercaillie surveys

Year	Population estimate (sexes combined)	95% confidence intervals
Winter 1993/94	2200	1500–3200
Winter 1998/99	1073	549–2041
Winter 2003/04	1980	1284–2758

Table 2: Capercaillie LIFE Project lek count summary for 2002, 2003 and 2004

Year	Number of leks counted	Minimum number of cocks counted	Mean number of cocks per lek
2002	44	135	3.07
2003	44	154	3.50
2004	44	185	4.20

Despite lack of statistical significance (the new estimate lies within confidence intervals of the previous estimate), the survey strongly suggests that a much-needed increase has occurred, and this is supported by evidence from other Capercaillie survey work. For example, a sample of leks monitored annually as part of the Capercaillie *Life* Project (see box 1 below) shows an increase within the same period (Table 2).

The rate of annual increase at leks is less than that indicated by the national survey. The Capercaillie Biodiversity Action Plan Steering Group – the group charged with co-ordinating action for this species – has the view that an increase has indeed occurred, but that the actual population figure is in the lower half of the estimate band (between 1,284 and 1,980 birds). The increase may at least partly be due to recent conservation action, particularly given the apparent concentration of birds in areas in Strathspey where conservation efforts have been immense, but Capercaillie may also show considerable between-year fluctuations in population levels. However, more favourable weather during the 2001, 2002 and 2003 breeding seasons led to improved breeding success and this has also contributed to the apparent improvement in status.

National distribution

The national survey showed a noticeable regional bias within the Capercaillie range (Table 3). Only three birds were detected on 157 transects surveyed in Tayside and the Trossachs; the population in this southern half of the range is now extremely small and has a high possibility of extinction. Elsewhere, relatively few birds were detected in Deeside, Donside, the Moray coastal area and Easter Ross. Most birds recorded on the survey were in Badenoch and Strathspey - now their last real stronghold. This is also shown in annual lek surveys.

The map overleaf shows the main current range in red. The pink areas are where Capercaillie are now effectively extinct. However, the map fails to illustrate the relative importance of Strathspey, and this increasing concentration of birds in one area is problematic as the population may be vulnerable to catastrophic events.

Capercaillie distribution map - 1980 and 2003

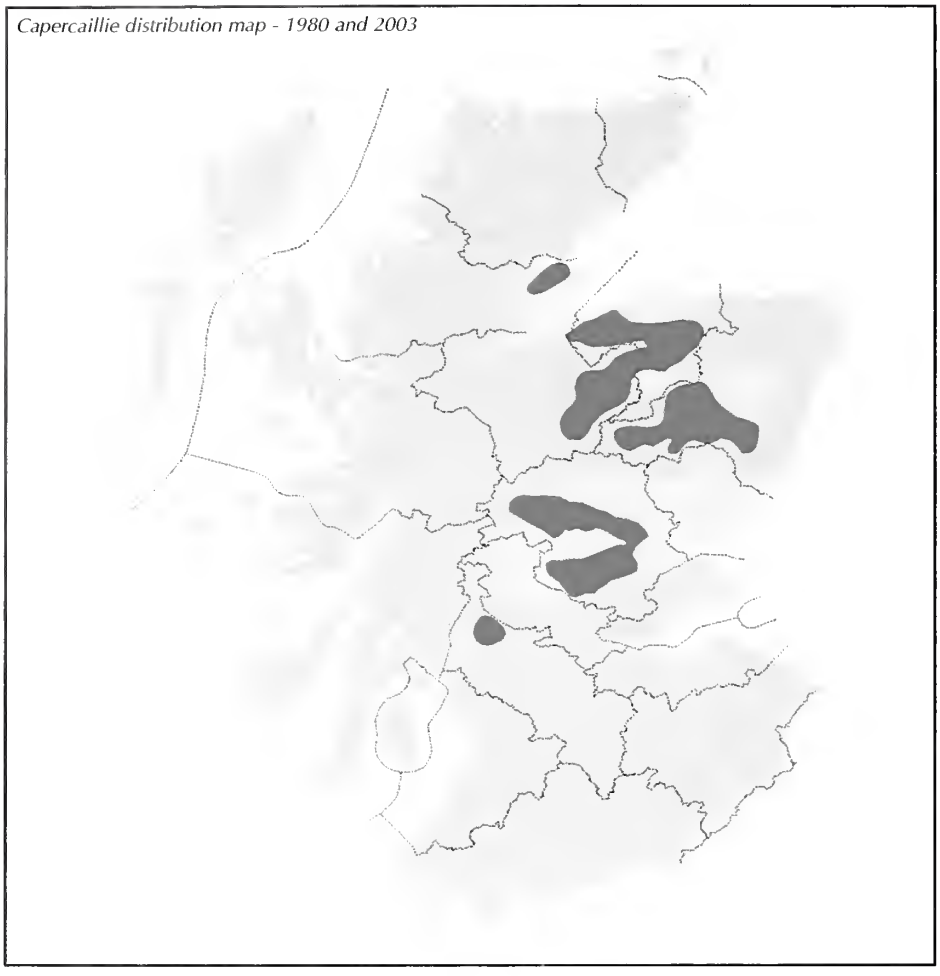


Table 3: Regional breakdown of Capercaillie sightings in the 2003–04 survey

	Number of transects surveyed	Number of Capercaillie recorded	Birds/km transect surveyed
Badenoch & Strathspey	152	80	0.263
Deeside & Donside	107	13	0.061
Moray coast & Easter Ross	227	24	0.053
Tayside & the Trossachs	157	3	0.009
Designated Special Protection Areas	92	65	0.353

Factors affecting Capercaillie in Scotland and conservation management

The recent Capercaillie decline has been due mainly to poor breeding success in the decade prior to 2001. In particular, changes in spring weather have delayed plant growth at key times. Fresh buds of larch and cotton grass, for example, are important food for hen Capers, but they need to begin growth at just the right time for the birds. Bud development has been delayed, meaning that hens may now be feeding on less nourishing plant food, leading to poorer quality eggs that hatch into chicks more susceptible to adverse weather and predation. This effect has been experimentally demonstrated in other grouse species. Capercaillie chick survival was extremely poor in the 1990s with many chicks killed annually by cold, wet weather.

To improve breeding success, larch is being retained in many forests and drained bogs are being re-flooded to provide cotton grass. In addition, extensive new areas of chick habitat are being created.

The most important food source for caper chicks is blaeberry because it supports large numbers of caterpillars and other insects and spiders. A diet rich in these invertebrates is crucial for caper chicks during their early weeks. Increasing blaeberry cover is therefore an important way of helping chicks. In practice, overgrazing (mainly by deer) and a reduction in thinning in pine plantations in recent years (due to currently low timber prices) have reduced the amount of blaeberry habitat available to chicks.

The amount of experimental work done on the predation of grouse is limited, but in an experiment on two Baltic islands where foxes and pine martens were removed, Capercaillie and Black Grouse reproduction and breeding density improved significantly. Scientists were unable to separate the effects of foxes from that of pine martens, but during the 1970s and 1980s, red foxes disappeared from large areas of Predation and deaths on forest fences also affect the birds' numbers. Populations of crows and foxes, the main 'generalist' predators of Capercaillie, have increased in recent decades and both species are almost certainly reducing Capercaillie breeding success. Research at the RSPB's Abernethy Forest reserve has shown that crow predation can reduce Capercaillie breeding success and that crow control is beneficial to Capercaillie in dry summers. Other studies have also shown that crows are important predators of grouse.

Norway due to a disease outbreak, Capercaillie and Black Grouse increased significantly whilst foxes were at very low numbers. Numbers of pine martens also increased during the same period, and it was concluded that pine martens were an unimportant predator of Capercaillie and Black Grouse because pine marten and grouse populations increased significantly at the same time. The fox, it seemed, was the most important predator in Norway. In Scotland, however, crows are unnaturally abundant and may have an even bigger impact on Capercaillie than do foxes. Crow and fox control is now carried out in many forests to improve Capercaillie productivity.

Caper chick *(Kenny Kortland)*

Along with pine martens, Buzzards are frequently assumed culpable in the decline of Capercaillie. However, there is little to support this assumption and, in fact, some evidence suggests otherwise. During a twelve-year study (1977–1988) of Buzzard diet during the breeding season, carried out in Moray when Capers were abundant, only three Capercaillie chicks were ever found in the buzzard nests. Over three hundred nest visits were made during the study. Rabbits were by far the most important food item, being found in large numbers in 99% of nests.

Research carried out in Scotland during the nineties indicated that forest fences killed almost a tenth of the adult Capercaillie population each year. More importantly, one quarter of all first-year birds were killed on fences while dispersing through unfamiliar woods. Several estate managers have reported finding large numbers of Capercaillie dead on fences.

To reduce the mortality cause by fences and using Scottish Executive funding of over £770,000, twenty-nine private estates and six FE Forest Districts undertook an impressive amount of fence work in 2001 and 2002. This resulted in the removal of 87 km of redundant deer fencing and the marking of 134 km of deer fencing. In addition, 35 km of stock fences were removed and 11 km of deer fencing was reduced to stock height. All of the work was carried out in woods known to be important to Capercaillie. Such work is ongoing, funded by the Scottish Forestry Grant Scheme. The benefits of this work are now being seen on many leks where cock numbers are increasing. Much management for Capercaillie is now being carried out as part of the Capercaillie *Life* Project (Box 1).

Box 1 – The 'Urgent Conservation Management for Capercaillie' Life Project
The European Union *Life* programme was launched in 1992 to provide funding to countries to assist in the implementation of the European Commission's environmental policies. In July 2002, the Caledonian Partnership (comprising the Scottish Executive, Forestry Commission Scotland, SNH, Cairngorm Partnership and RSPB Scotland) secured £2.5 million of *Life* funding for the Scottish Capercaillie project. This was matched by a money and time from the partnership agencies, channelling European and domestic funds into Scottish communities and rural jobs.

The five-year project aims to halt Capercaillie decline. Involving over forty private and publicly owned forests, the bulk of the work is habitat creation and improvement (over 7,000 ha), predator control (over 34,000 ha) and fence removal and marking (over 36 km within SPAs).

Forest bog and inset of marked deer fencing *(Kenny Kortland)*

Other actions include the purchase of a forest by RSPB, population monitoring, disturbance management, advisory events for project participants and the development of management policy guidelines for Capercaillie – for which the input of landowners and forest managers will be vital.

Capercaillie viewing and the law

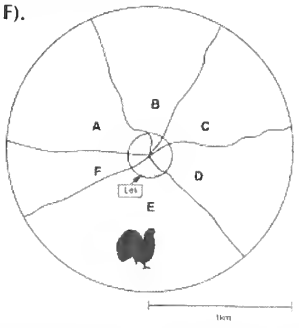
Capercaillie leks (Box 2) are real wildlife spectacles where these huge birds display to watching females. However, there are now fewer than 80 leks in Scotland and it is important that these are left undisturbed if birds are to mate successfully. Capercaillie are also specially protected on Schedule 1 (Part I) of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) and it is illegal to intentionally or recklessly disturb a Capercaillie lek or active nest.

To see a Capercaillie lek, the best place is the RSPB's Loch Garten hide, where birds can be observed directly and on CCTV. Capers are seen on over 90% of mornings from April to early May (for more information telephone 01463 715000). However, the best time to see Capercaillie is in early autumn, when population densities are highest. Quiet walks through woods in the morning at this time of year can lead to multiple sightings of these giant grouse.

Box 2 – Capercaillie basics
Lek – A lek is a small area in a forest where Capercaillie cocks gather to display to hens at dawn in April and early May. This is often a traditional site, but leks can move as the forest structure changes. Open mature conifer forest is favoured because of good visibility through the trees. Up to twenty or more cocks can attend a lek, but in Scotland, most leks now have fewer than five cocks. At big leks, displaying cocks can be spread over a few hectares. Hens observe the action and the dominant cock, or 'Alpha' cock, mates with most of them.

Lek range – From March to late May, cocks spend their time within the lek range, which surrounds the lek. Each cock has a near-exclusive daytime territory and these are arranged around the lek like the wedges of a pie (see Fig 1). Territories vary in size and extend up to 1 km from the lek centre. In good quality habitat, territories are smaller. In Scotland, the number of cocks at a lek is related to the proportion of forest over 45 years old within 1 km of the lek centre.

Figure 1 – Capercaillie lek range with six cock territories (A – F).



Metapopulation – Forest habitat in Scotland is fragmented and set within a matrix of farmland and moorland. No single patch of forest is large enough to support a viable population of Capercaillie. However, the different populations of birds in the separate woods are linked by dispersal to form a 'metapopulation'. Hen Capercaillies can disperse up to 30 km from the site where they were born; cocks tend to be more sedentary. Thus, a series of leks in individual woods are connected by dispersing birds to

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North Ronaldsay - a bit of history

North Ronaldsay from the south (Kevin Woodbridge)

2005 marks the 21st year of continuous daily recording of birds on North Ronaldsay, since the establishment of the Bird Observatory in 1985 and its formal accreditation by the Bird Observatories' Council in 1987. In this time, the island has become very widely known as one of the prime Scottish sites for migration watching and a rewarding place to visit at any season.

Of course the island had been known to aficionados long before this. Victorian naturalists 'obtained' numerous specimens on the island, still evidenced at Holland House, where among other mounted specimens reside such gems as Squacco Heron and Pallas's Sandgrouse. More recently, island luminaries such as R. M. Lockley have visited, and more regular coverage was achieved during the 1960's and 70's. Jim Williams, who is now recorder for Orkney was among a pioneering group of ringers from Hampshire who regularly started coming around this time, and notably Ken Walker during his spell as a lighthouse keeper provided many interesting records. Ken famously advertised for a ringer to come and train him in return for free hospitality, attracting Michael King who continued an annual autumn pilgrimage into the early days of the observatory, often in company with Andrew Ramsay, then teaching at Kirkwall Grammar School.

My arrival in 1977 as the island's General Practitioner allowed me to take up the reins left by Ken and with the help of those already mentioned and an increasing band of fellow enthusiasts, a bird observatory was established. Not least among the supporters were a number of native islanders, many of whom continue a tradition within the community of having a deep knowledge of birds. If the phone rings with a 'funny bird in my garden' call, this cannot be dismissed and we have been guided to many good records this way. These are now supplemented by a group of experienced new resident birders, several of whom were obviously found to be irresistible by some of the locals and since then are espoused! Included among this latter group is Alison Duncan, who came on holiday in 1987 and is still here as Principal Warden.

Kevin and a Veery

Why North Ronaldsay?

The Northern Isles (Orkney and Shetland) lie at a kind of migration junction. Many Fennoscandian species, particularly passerines, use Britain as their main or alternative passage route between their breeding and wintering grounds, and birds moving to and from the Faeroe Islands, Iceland, Greenland and northern Canada, particularly waders and wildfowl, take a more westerly track. Both these routes can converge on the Northern Isles, which can be viewed as a long broken peninsula snaking out from the top of mainland Scotland as a gateway to Britain and beyond. This offers the shortest distances over water before staging for many birds and a geographical landmark for coasting migrants to follow.

The Observatory *(Kevin Woodbridge)*

Looked at like this, it becomes apparent why North Ronaldsay and Fair Isle are especially favoured watching points, as they both lie in the narrow 'isthmus' of this broken peninsula, and both have a relatively large coastline to land area ratio. The geographical narrowing leads to a concentration of migrants and the small land area means that these birds do not have any substantial hinterland in which to disperse. Although an adequate description, this may however be a little simplistic, as the relatively high frequency of rare birds among fewer common migrants on outposts such as Foula and St Kilda raises unanswered related questions.

Mention of Fair Isle also begs the question - why have two observatories so close together? The simple answer is of course that you can never have too much good data collected, but additionally there are marked contrasts between the islands that allow significantly different observations of migration. Fair Isle has its magnificent seabird colonies and the short sheep-grazed sward of its farmed area enables relatively easy viewing of grounded passerines. North Ronaldsay lacks the seabird cliffs but has a richer and more diverse range of habitats enabling the staging of some species which are not evident on Fair Isle. For example, its sandy beaches harbour several hundreds of Sanderling in May when Fair Isle only records intermittent single figure counts of this species. This is also true for other waders and, similarly, good numbers of migrant wildfowl which utilise the wetlands on North Ronaldsay.

Another major contrast is the close passage of seabirds past North Ronaldsay, moving between the North Sea and the Atlantic across the top of Orkney, whereas Fair Isle lacks the nearby geography to focus such passage. Spectacular movements can be seen in favourable weather, for example several hundred Sooty Shearwaters passing per hour have been noted on occasion. None of this is intended to suggest that the island is better (or worse!) than Fair Isle for birding, just very different despite its proximity of about 25 miles.

Nouster Bay - Obs. in foreground *(Kevin Woodbridge)*

What to see, where and when

North Ronaldsay is a low lying island (peaks at 30 metres) marking the north eastern corner of Orkney. It consists of a patchwork of croft land interspersed with small iris-fringed lochs, some marshland and wet meadows. It is famous for its native sheep flock, a unique breed related to the primitive northern short-tailed group that includes Soay, Vilsoy, Icelandic, etc. The sheep are adapted to a seaweed diet, and are confined to the coast by a stone dyke that runs for approximately 13 miles encircling the croft land. Beyond the dyke there are several extensive areas of relict heathland with some vestigial heather and wild flowers, but heavily punished by intensive grazing at full tides. The actual coastline varies from fine shell sand beaches through every grade of shingle and boulder beach to the mini cliffs and geos pounded by the Atlantic on the west side.

The croft houses are scattered fairly uniformly across the landscape with no central village as such, though the airfield, shop, surgery, churches, school, post office and community hall are all loosely aggregated in the middle area of the island. Situated slightly to the south of these is Holland House, which is a major focus for the bird observatory. The house itself belongs to the Laird of the island, Caroline Tindall, though the estate is now considerably diminished with much of the land in crofting owner occupancy. The bird interest is in the extensive garden area consisting of overgrown Fuscia bushes, stunted Sycamores with the odd Whitebeam and Elder mixed in. Being the highest point of the island and an isolated patch of vegetation in an expanse of farmland, it acts as a magnet for migrant passerines and other arboreal species, often with large roosts. The observatory has a formal agreement with the estate to census and mist net in this private area and the majority of the migrant birds ringed each year are trapped here using the converted dog kennels as a ringing station.

The Stevenson lighthouse at the north end of the island was automated in 1998, since when access has been lost for catching birds during the major attractions that can occur. The biggest of these involve autumn thrushes and the light was estimated to have at least 60,000 birds around it on one November night. Good numbers of Wheatears and Skylarks were also regularly ringed from the tower, species otherwise not easily caught in numbers as adults. It is still an amazing sight from the base of the tower and some hand-netting is still possible on busy nights, best when light easterly winds combine with foggy drizzle and an absent moon.

Sheep and seals sharing the shore *(Kevin Woodbridge)*

A birdwatching visit to the island can be rewarding at any time of year. A recent 'bird race' in February produced 70 species, many to be expected, though Black-throated Diver was unpredicted in company with the usual Red-throated and Great Northerns. It was nice to find both Iceland and Glaucous gulls, Jack Snipe, Hen Harrier and the regular wintering Snow Buntings, Whoopers etc., though where the wintering Merlin hid that day is a mystery and a group of Barnacles appeared to have moved on.

In summer, breeding birds are of considerable interest with some of the highest densities of breeding waders recorded, notably Oystercatcher, Lapwing, Curlew, Redshank and Ringed Plover, a wide variety of duck including some of the isolated pocket of Orkney Gadwall, and as would be expected a good selection of seabirds. Though the cliff nesters (excepting the ubiquitous Fulmar) are not represented, five species of tern have been recorded nesting. Black-headed Gulls are strongly represented with Common being widespread, while other species have a toehold along with Great and Arctic Skuas in very small numbers. Cormorants breed on the Seal Skerry and Black Guillemots breed densely along the boulder coastlines. Corncrakes are now regular again in small numbers suggesting their return after a period of blank years. Storm Petrels probably also breed in small numbers - many are trapped at night in the summer by 'CD lure' for ringing.

A spring Bluethroat *(Kevin Woodbridge)*

But of course it is the spring and autumn migration that has made the island so well known. Rightly so, as it is an exhilarating sight to see the spring birds in pristine plumage passing through on their way to the breeding grounds and sometimes huge autumn falls of birds which can be Pipits, Flycatchers, Blackcaps or Thrushes. The variety and species mix are dependent on the date and the weather, and are thus infinitely variable. Silly numbers of scarce birds can turn up - I recall a day with 15 Grey Phalaropes ashore on the island lochs and wondering if the county recorder would believe me and another when we counted 30 Wrynecks. There is little to compare with a fine sunny day in late May with a Scandinavian high and the island littered with Red-backed Shrikes and Bluethroats and the prospect of finding other attractive species in equally stunning plumages.

As for the rarities, well, twitches have become part and parcel of observatory life with birding invasions for birds such as Veery, Siberian Blue Robin, White's Thrush, Siberian Thrush, Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler, Sykes's Warbler, Yellow-browed Bunting - the list goes on. Much adrenalin and cortisone rushes through the veins on such occasions, but these glamorous moments should not obscure the joy and interest of the 'bread and butter' migration work the observatory undertakes and the scientific value of the data it collects through the day to day activities of its staff and visitors.

Northern Bullfinches *(Kevin Woodbridge)*

Access and contacts

The observatory is rated as a 3-star Guest House by VisitScotland and is extending its accommodation this winter. On completion, there will be seven en-suite guest rooms available, new laundry and drying room and an extended and refurbished kitchen. It is fully licensed with a well stocked bar. Dormitory accommodation is also available with board or self-catering in the ten-bedded hostel annexe. Flights to the island cost £12.00 from Kirkwall, conditional on at least one overnight stay.

For more details contact Alison Duncan Tel: 01857 633200 or alison@nrbo.prestel.co.uk Website: www.nrbo.f2s.com

Kevin Woodbridge

NOTES & COMMENT

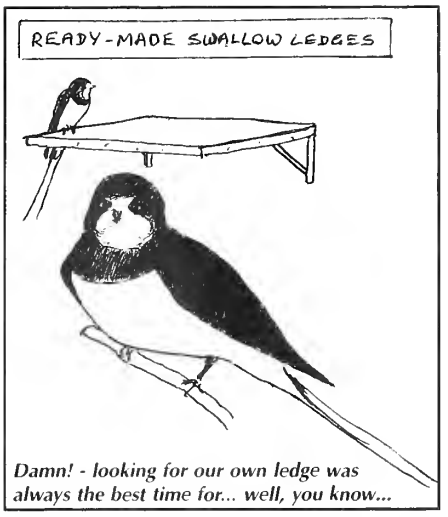
City Swallows

Clare Darlaston is known for her work on behalf of Swifts (Swift Concern) in Scotland, especially her advice to builders re. accommodating this species in their house designs. Here, she turns her attention to Swallows.....

Last summer (2003) was the first time I had really noted the adaptability of urban swallows. Returning to St Magdalen's Distillery, Linlithgow, to see how the swifts were faring in the holes which were left for them in the renovated building, I was delighted to find a pair of swallows nesting under a low roof canopy with the nest supported only by the roughness of roughcast on the walls.

Near where I work, on the edge of Glasgow, the swallows disappear into one of the hoppers of Tarmac's depot, and down the road they nest under the overhang of a garage forecourt on an RSJ beam – made welcome by the owners. One evening in Locharbriggs, Dumfries, I noticed them flying in and out of a motor mechanic's workshop, over the top of the roller shutter, which was closed at the time. In Coatbridge I have seen a nest sitting precariously on the top of a burglar alarm box, and a pair of swallows flying in and out of a house balcony.

For the past few years, swallows have nested in derelict buildings in the east end of Glasgow. In fact Glasgow Housing Association held off the demolition of houses in Haghill this summer to let the swallows get away. For two summers at least this property 'housed' two pairs of swallows which may have reared two broods apiece. Where were they before they took to the houses and where will they go next year? This presence of swallows in the city seems to me to be a special thing worth striving to keep.



Damn! - looking for our own ledge was always the best time for... well, you know...

The point is that swallows appear to be rather more adaptable than swifts, and that the name "barn swallow" is a misnomer. It is possible – nay, easy – to make some provision for our urban swallows, just as it is to make provision for our urban swifts.

Clare Darlaston

Garage nest sites *(Clare Darlaston)*

Dark Song Thrushes

In SBN *74, David Jenkins described some dark migrant Song Thrushes seen in Aboyne and quoted* BWP *which describes similar birds. The author involved in the latter, D.I.M. Wallace, now responds with some interesting comment.*

From memory, I first heard of strange, dark, immigrant Song Thrushes on Fair Isle in the early 1950s. I first studied them with care on Flamborough Head from 1972 to 1985. There and then, the Flamborough Ornithological Group came to regard them as typically "rather early" autumn migrants, occurring between 28 Sept. and 23 Oct. and in falls of up to 110 birds. Appearing usually ahead of the commoner, noticeably greyer continental *philomelos,* they came to be regarded as the forerunners of each autumn's thrush influx. Their arrival circumstances left us in no doubt that most had come across the North Sea.

Later observers there seem to have got bored with the dark birds, but in my Staffordshire patch of Needwood Forest I came upon such morphs in 1987 and 1993. With renewed interest and concentration, I have recorded them annually from 1996; altogether 90 birds have appeared in nine successive autumn/winters. The earliest was dated 25 Sept. but most (unlike the Flamborough birds) have come in Nov. and Dec, with stragglers in Jan. and Feb. Over the same 19 years, I have attributed over 230 birds to Continental *philomelos*, mainly in Oct. and Nov. So dark birds make up about a third of my winter immigrants - few however settle for more than a few days. In Staffordshire, I have suspected that five may have been strays from the Hebrides, but only recently (on 26 Dec. 2004) has one shown me the(?) diagnostic, more rufous underwing of that form. The rest have been 'dead ringers' for the Flamborough birds, and seemingly, David Jenkins' Aboyne birds (*SBN* 74:20)

I have made several enquiries of museum taxonomists about these birds but answer comes there none. Given that *hebridensis* is a product of isolation and Atlantic exposure, I fancy Norway as the most likely source of these distinctive, yet undescribed birds. Anyway, it is good to have some mysteries left!

D.I.M.Wallace

Last word on Redwings

Following Chris Mylne's note on Redwings (Sept. *SBN*), James Kinch has written to report several sightings of 40 twittering Redwings in holly trees in St. James Park , Portobello. Unlike the previous spring

records and David Jenkins autumn one (Dec. *SBN*), this attractive sound was witnessed in late December and again in January (05). He wonders if the nature of the local environment can be causing this very unseasonal and seemingly hitherto unreported singing.

Chris Mylne adds that this singing "is totally different from the song of an adult male on territory in spring. However the subsong which often follows the loud falling cadence of the territorial fluting song as a kind of chuckling to finish up with, is exactly what these winter birds produce in chorus, probably as a contact sound to keep the flock together."

Waxwings

From the 23rd October 2004 Waxwings were present in Pitlochry. At least 250 were there during 28th October to 1st November and 12 overflew my home near Ballinluig, 5 miles to the south, on 29th October. Subsequently I saw none locally until 19th December when the behaviour of small birds drew my attention to a single bird perched in the upper branches of a 20 foot Rowan in my garden. About 10 birds, mostly Blue Tits and with one or two Chaffinches, were fussing around the Waxwing. I wouldn't have described the behaviour as mobbing but it was similar. One other observer has mentioned seeing much the same behaviour. Is it widespread? I did not observe Waxwings being 'mobbed' during the breeding season in Finland.

R. E. Youngman, Blairchroisk Cottage, Ballinluig, PH9 0NE

Willow Warbler *(Alison McArthur)*

Spring is here

As you read this, many birders will be awaiting that sound that always clinches the fact that spring is really with us again – the downward-lilting song of the Willow Warbler. Just to whet your anticipation, here is Alison McArthur's photograph of the species which caused such favourable comment at last year's Conference.

Caption Competition

Provide a caption for the birds picture below and have a chance of winning an SOC hat.

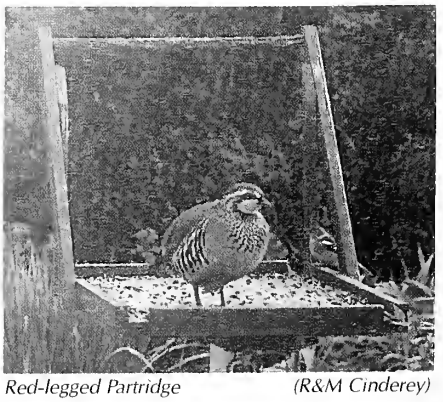
Each *SBN* edition will feature a new photo. The winner and other best captions will be shown in *SBN* 76. Send your single caption by E-mail to jimmy.maxwell @virgin.net

Gull *(Lang Stewart)*

The winning Caption from *SBN* 74 (see photo above) came from Andrew Miller with -"*Damn this global warming, I'm sure the Bass was here somewhere*"- congratulations! Others – "*Hermes resurfacing after making a brief report to Poseidon*"- (Biddy Gray) "*Guyser Jarl gets out of his depth!*" (Tim Marshall) and "*Skimmer mimicry by gull ends in disaster*"(Angus Hogg)

Garden Birds

Sightings from Richard and Margaret Cinderey from their garden at Castle Douglas include this Red-legged Partridge on the bird-table. They have logged 46 Blackbirds there in one day, encouraging them with, among many other foods, 1kilo. of raisins every two days! The local female Sparrowhawk also benefits by killing 7 of these Blackbirds over two months in the wintertime. However their numbers appear to remain unaffected – possibly due to their 'raisins d'etres'?



Red-legged Partridge *(R&M Cinderey)*

Cormorants *(Lang Stewart)*

Windfarms comment

J. Rigby Mirtle of Cardonald, Glasgow writes to express doubt regarding the best placing of windfarms in Scotland – "the firms (and landowners) involved in these projects are not doing it for altruistic purposes but for profit and inevitably corners will be cut. Will an Environmental Impact Assessment carried out by a developer be without bias? – David McArthur (Scottish Power) is talking up a "best practice scenario" which I do not think will be generally followed – what about the proposal to build 234 wind turbines and associated infrastructures on a Special Protection Area on Lewis ? – this can hardly be considered appropriate in terms of scale or location". Wave power, solar energy and nuclear power are quoted as viable forms of renewable energy and politicians as being obsessed with windpower and only able to think short-term. "Windpower may have a part to play but I think we must be very careful not to allow that part to turn into a headlong rush for windfarms to the exclusion of other systems".

Dutch Windfarms

A report in *Dutch Birding* (vol 27-1-05) quotes a survey of bird victims at 239 wind-turbines over a 2-year period in Brandenburg, Germany. A total of 600 individuals of 62 species were found including 42 Red Kites, 13 White-tailed Eagles, 24 Buzzards and 7 White Storks. There are a further 1500 turbines in the same State and a total of 15,800 in Germany altogether. This alarmingly indicates the potential danger to birds at windfarms.

Abstracted by Keith MacGregor - Journals Librarian.

Donation of books

A large collection of bird books, the property of the late DR Gordon G. Rennie, a former SOC member, has been generously gifted to the Club by his wife DR Morag L.Rennie of Carluke.

We very much appreciate this donation for the Library, both to expand our already considerable collection and also to generate funds towards our expensive move to Waterston House.

David Clugston. Chairman. Library Committee.

An early record of Mistle Thrush breeding

I work in the University of Strathclyde in central Glasgow and for at least three years have watched resident Mistle Thrushes in this area.

Around 7th Feb. 2005, I became aware of harsh squawking coming from the back of my office area in the Sir Graham Hills building which has an internal car park and several deep void spaces which are open to the elements. The noise continued for several days and on 14 Feb., I saw a Mistle Thrush chick on the floor of one of these spaces. Over the next two hours it was fed several times by an adult bird which flew down from the car park above.

The chick seemed to be quite well developed [though tail feathers were still very short]. There was no sign of a nest. Although the area is a very grubby with wind-blown rubbish, it is inaccessible to ground predators like cats and foxes. Anecdotally from colleagues, baby birds have been found here several times in the past.

Unfortunately after a frosty night on 15th Feb. the chick was seen to be dead - the bird's corpse appeared complete so I do not think it was the work of a predator.

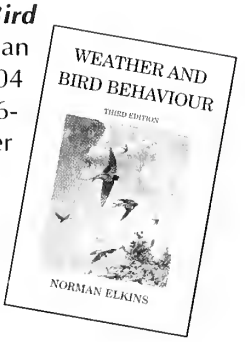
This seems to be an unusually early occurrence of breeding for Mistle Thrush. *BWP* Concise states that in Britain the earliest nests are in late February. Incubation and fledging periods are both 12–15 days so the egg must have been laid in the latter half of January.

David McBeth

Mistle Thrushes have already hit the headlines many years ago in this area by nesting in the amber of traffic lights in Cathedral St. Also Dr. Chris McGuigan writes to remind us of a nest with three well-grown young in a Christmas decoration in George Square on 17th Jan. 1997. His explanation of this phenomenon is that the festive "spirit" in Glasgow makes Mistletoe more effective at encouraging unseasonably amorous behaviour among the Thrushes...

BOOK REVIEWS

Weather & Bird Behaviour by Norman Elkins 3rd ed 2004 280 pp ISBN 0-7136-6825-3 Christopher Helm £35

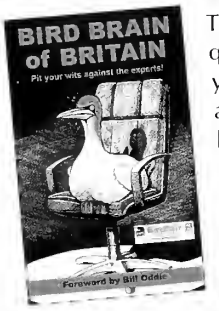


This is the third edition of a well known book. The text has been reworked and updated.

Norman is an acknowledged expert on the subject (eg he contributed the weather chapter in the Migration Atlas), and it is surely significant that there has been sufficient demand to justify a third edition. Anyone at all interested in why birds move about (which should be anyone interested in birds) and who hasn't got a copy of an earlier edition, will want a copy of this one

John Davies

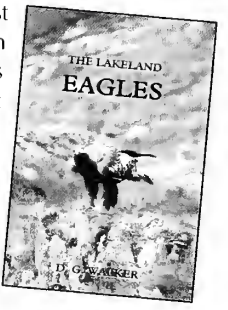
Bird Brain of Britain edited by Charles Gallimore & Tim Appleton 2004 ISBN 0-7136-7036-3 Christopher Helm £7.99



This contains the quizzes set over 12 years at the Bird Fair, and the answers. There has been some updating where necessary. If you are setting a bird quiz, this will provide a mine of questions – though bear in mind that the original panels were experts and some questions are not easy!

John Davies

The Lakeland Eagles by D G Walker 2nd ed 2004 75pp. Pbk. ISBN 0-9517378-0-5. Obtainable from author, 5 Naddlegate, Burnbanks, Penrith CA10 2RL, £3.



This updates the first edition published in 1991 and includes results of recent studies. It gives a brief history of Golden Eagles in Cumbria and includes detailed chapters on home range and territory use, winter behaviour, incubation, nestling and post-fledging periods, food and hunting, and display and voice. The information is based mainly on the author's own observations from 1979 to 2004 in Cumbria and is particularly interesting in relation to the behaviour of juveniles and the display of adults. In his introduction the author expresses pessimism for the future of eagles in Cumbria because "breeding performance is linked to the pre-laying period food supply" and this has become unreliable in recent years. A book worth reading.

Joan Wilcox

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RECENT REPORTS

A Review of winter 2004/5

Ivory Gull, Highland *(Jim Duncan)*

There was plenty of interest for Scottish birdwatchers this winter period what with the biggest Waxwing influx ever and then in Jan and Feb an influx of northern gulls. It was overall a very mild period, with winds coming almost exclusively from a west/north-west direction until the third week in February. This comparative mildness in Dec. resulted in an unprecedented over-wintering **Red-spotted Bluethroat**, a male, first seen on 20th Nov. and present at the RSPB Loch of Strathbeg reserve (Aberdeenshire) up to the 28th Dec., finding the reeds by the Fen Hide to its liking. Equally unlikely in Dec. was an

Desert Lesser Whitethroat, Aberdeenshire *(Harry Scott)*

apparent **Desert Lesser Whitethroat**. Found on the 5th Dec. at the Institute of Medical Sciences at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary it remained until the 21st. The bird's overall appearance was very distinctive as was its tit-like rattling call and seen in the hand, measurements also pointed to a probable *minula* individual, though DNA analysis may be the only way to rule out the other eastern forms. Unsurprisingly, other scarce and rare passerines were thin on the ground, though up to five **Shore Larks** were present throughout in Lothian (two at Aberlady Bay and up to three at Tyninghame) and two or three **Water Pipits** were in Ayrshire and Lothian. Seven **Black Redstarts** were reported in Jan. and Feb., including unusually for mid-winter, four on the Northern Isles and, despite a bumper winter in England and Wales, only two **Great Grey Shrikes** were reported - at Tulloch Moor on 9th Dec., and near Beauly on 24th-25th Feb. (both Highland). In Dec. a possible **Northern Long-tailed Tit** was reported at Aberdeen University on 9th whilst in Caithness a late **Firecrest** was at Reay on 11th–13th . On the last day of the year a **Black-bellied Dipper** was seen on Unst (Shetland) at Hermaness, reported again there on 14th Jan., and a **Dark-breasted Barn Owl** over-wintered at Reawick(Shetland), being still present at its favourite cow shed there on 8th Feb. at least.

Since Oct. though, only two passerines have been the main headline grabbers – namely **Waxwing** and **Northern Bullfinch**. The unprecedented Waxwing "invasion" is hard to comprehend. Those birdwatchers with Waxwing fatigue after several very good winters in the last fifteen years or so may find it hard to believe that much of the 1970's and early 1980's were drought years for this species, e.g. only 10+ individuals were reported from the whole of Scotland in 1983. This winter though, numbers are truly exceptional with most areas in Scotland having seen record counts, as have most counties in England and Wales, the birds having moved south and west. Nevertheless in Scotland in Feb. there were still very good numbers around mostly in the Clyde area, Lothian and Aberdeenshire. Possibly 1,000+ 'over wintering' birds were seen during Feb. begging the question as to actually how many were around when the influx was at its peak back in Oct/Nov. The Northern Bullfinch influx however is completely un-chartered territory. These 'big bullies' that are around in Scotland this autumn/winter have possibly come from areas to the east of Scandinavia. Whatever their origin the numbers involved this winter have been unprecedented and observers have been struck by their distinctive call (variously described as Trumpeter Finch/Red-breasted Nuthatch/ "toy trumpet-like") which is quite unlike the normal soft call-notes of the local *pileata* birds. Small numbers were still around in Scotland during Jan. and Feb. and that distinctive far-carrying contact call was heard in Feb. from birds in Lanarkshire, Lothian, Argyll and Moray (where 24 were seen at Aberlour on 14th) as well as in the Northern Isles and Outer Hebrides. Could some of them stay on to breed?

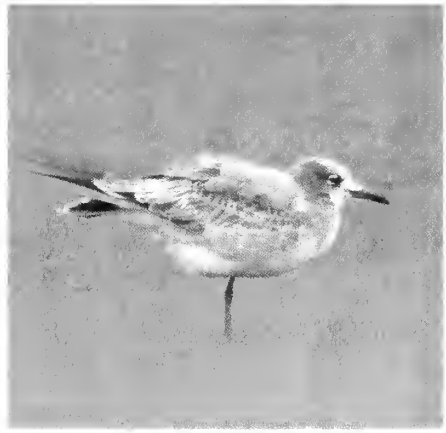
It has been a great winter period for rare and scarce gulls with the 1st-winter **Ivory Gull**, first seen in mid-Nov., remaining at the Kyle of Tongue (Highland) until 6th Jan at least. Also in early Jan., a 1st-winter **Laughing Gull** was at Carnoustie on 5th-8th – a third record for Angus. At least three adult **Bonaparte's Gulls** were seen; one at Stornoway harbour (Outer Hebrides) on 10th Jan, again at Dunnet Bay, then Thurso (Caithness) on 10th Jan-1st Feb and also at Peterhead on 31st Jan with it or another nearby at Fraserburgh on 9th–11th Feb. Good views at Fraserburgh suggested that the bird may have been a 2nd-winter with black remnant markings noted on the outer primaries. Whatever its age, the first record(s) for Aberdeenshire and when at Peterhead, it was seen in the same scope view as an adult **Ross's Gull** which was present from 29th Jan–14th Feb. Suitably confiding, it may have been the same bird as seen earlier in Jan. on south Mainland Shetland on 8th–26th.

Bonaparte's Gull, Caithness *(Martin Scott)*

Up to eight **Ring-billed Gulls** were seen in the period including up to four different on the Outer Hebrides, whilst four **Yellow-legged Gulls** were reported in Jan. and Feb. including an adult at Hogganfield Loch, Glasgow on 24th-31st Jan. There was a major influx of **Iceland** and **Glaucous Gulls** during Jan., certainly the best numbers for the former species since 1993 - at least 250 Iceland and 140+ Glaucous Gulls were reported with very good numbers still around during the first half of Feb. The Outer Hebrides and Shetland held the bulk of the records, though Highland, Argyll and Aberdeenshire also saw very good numbers. The largest reported count of Iceland Gull was 23 at Stornoway (Outer Hebrides) on 18th Feb. and many of the imm. Glaucous Gulls seen were of the large/pale variety suggesting a Greenland origin. Several **Kumlien's Gulls** were reported though many of the imm. Kumlien's type birds that were seen, although having a dark wash to the primaries, lacked the classic 'venetian blind' effect on the outer primaries.

Ross's Gull, Aberdeenshire *(Chris Jones)*

Iceland Gull, Aberdeenshire *(Harry Scott)*



Laughing Gull, Angus *(Alan Clewes)*

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Black Duck, Aberdeenshire *(Harry Scott)*

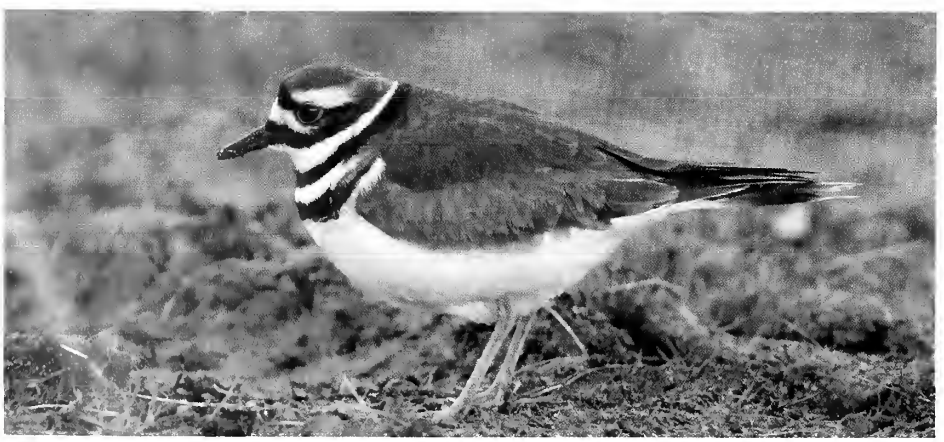
As always in Scotland in winter there was a good showing by rare and scarce wildfowl. A drake **Black Duck** was found at a quarry pool near New Pitsligo on 5th Dec., remaining until at least the 20th Jan (first record for Aberdeenshire). Up to two different drake **Lesser Scaups** were reported at Loch Leven (Perth & Kinross) between 4th-15th Dec. whilst a drake was reported at Milton Loch (Dumfries & Galloway) on 18th-25th Jan. Four **King Eiders** were seen, a drake and a returning female on Shetland, a drake again at Loch Ryan (Dumfries & Galloway) from 2nd Dec and a 2nd-winter drake in the Peterhead area (Aberdeesnhire) off and on throughout. Up to eight drake **American Wigeons** were reported in a good showing with up to 13 drake **Green-winged Teals** also seen, including four at Vane Farm RSPB (Perth & Kinross) on 11th Dec. Six **Ring-necked Ducks** were reported, all drakes apart from a female in Aberdeenshire and up to 14 **Surf Scoters** were seen including up to five (three drakes and two females) in the Sound of Taransay (Outer Hebrides). It was a disappointing winter for **Smew** with around 20 seen, including a high proportion of drakes and with Loch Leven taking over as the premier site for the species from Strathclyde Loch and RSPB Loch of Strathbeg. Rarer geese were at a premium although two **Snow Geese** were seen in Feb: a blue morph in the Cullerlie area (Aberdeesnhire) on 9th-11th and a white morph in the Loch Crinan area (Argyll) from 6th.

Rounding off a year to remember on the Outer Hebrides, a **Killdeer** was found near Knockintorran, North Uist on Christmas Day. It remained until the 8th Jan with it or another then seen briefly at the River Esk mouth at Musselburgh on the morning of 22nd Jan – first record for Lothian. Also on the Outer Hebrides the imm. **Snowy Owl** remained at Loch Bee, South Uist until 3rd Dec., another was reported on North Uist on 29th Jan. and at the end of Jan., one on Coll on 27th and then Tiree on 29th – there are only four previous Argyll records, the last being in 1872. The **American Coot** on Shetland was present on the Loch of Benston until the 23rd Feb while up to three **White-billed Divers** were seen on Shetland: in Bluemull Sound and off Fetlar in Jan. and then an adult that showed well at Colla Firth from 20th Feb. Also in Feb. one was seen off Inverneil (Argyll) on 5th. Only one **Bittern** was reported this winter, at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (Aberdeenshire) up to 17th Feb at least, whilst three or four **Little Egrets** were seen, at least two different in Dumfries & Galloway and one at Loch Leven (Perth & Kinross) throughout.

Normally more associated with records in March and April, there was a mini 'influx' of **Gyr Falcons** with at least six seen from the 9th Dec., all imm. white morphs. Reports started with one seen on Islay (Argyll) on 9th Dec. with further birds on North Uist from the 21st and on Fair Isle on 31st–13th Jan. In Jan. and Feb. at least three were seen on Shetland including one that landed on a fishing boat 50miles west of Ramna Stacks on 11th Feb! - at least two were seen on the Outer Hebrides in Feb. Catching up with one however was not easy, none proving truly 'twitchable'.

Unseasonable seabirds in Jan. included a **Leach's Petrel** off Turnberry Point (Ayrshire) on 4th and three **Pomarine Skuas** past Tarbat Ness (Highland) on 14th. Only comparatively low numbers of **Little Auks** were reported in Dec. and Jan. but then a prolonged period of north-easterly and easterly winds at the end of Feb. produced reasonable numbers in Aberdeenshire/Angus/Lothian and Fife, including c300 in just fifteen minutes past Crail (Fife) on 24th.

Angus Murray



Killdeer, North Uist *(Michael McKee)*

Scottish Bird News

Scottish Bird News is the magazine of the SOC. It acts as a channel of communication for SOC members and disseminates information relevant to Scotland's birdlife. It is published four times a year at the beginning of March, June, September and December. Articles and notices are welcomed and should be sent to the Editor at the address below no later than five weeks before publication. The views expressed are not necessarily the policy of the SOC. Contributors should note that material has to be edited, often at short notice, and it is not practical to let authors see these changes in advance of publication.

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The Scottish Ornithologists' Club (SOC) was established by a group of Scottish ornithologists who met together in the rooms of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society in Edinburgh on 24th March 1936.

The Club now has 2200 members and 14 branches around Scotland. It plays a central role in Scottish birdwatching, bringing together amateur birdwatchers, keen birders and research ornithologists with the aims of documenting, studying and, not least, enjoying Scotland's varied birdlife. Above all, the SOC is a club, relying heavily on keen volunteers and the support of its membership.

Headquarters provide central publications and an annual conference, and houses the Waterston Library, the most comprehensive library of bird literature in Scotland. The network of branches, which meet in Aberdeen, Ayr, the Borders, Dumfries, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverness, New Galloway, Orkney, St Andrews, Stirling, Stranraer and Thurso, organise field meetings, a winter programme of talks and social events.

The SOC also supports the Local Recorders' Network and the Scottish Birds Records Committee. The latter maintains the 'official' Scottish List on behalf of the Club. The Club supports research and survey work through its Research Grants.

The Club maintains a regularly-updated web site, which not only contains much information about the Club, but is also the key source of information about birds and birdwatching in Scotland.

www.the-soc.org.uk

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